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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [MR](#)
SUBJECT: THE MAURITANIANS DISAPPOINT -- AZIZ ELECTED

Classified By: Ambassador Mark M. Boulware for
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

11. (C) Summary: The Mauritanian people appear to have selected General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz as their next duly elected president. Although there are isolated reports of inappropriate efforts to influence voters, the election itself proceeded reasonably well offering the population a chance to express its free will. The percentage of potential fraud does not seem sufficient to have changed a plurality win for Aziz -- although it might have forced a second-round runoff. After a year of activist diplomacy meant to ensure the Mauritanian people had the right to chose their own leaders, it appears the majority opted for a traditional approach of supporting those with the power (or chose to give up their vote for short-term gain.) An Aziz victory poses significant challenges for U.S. engagement with Mauritania.
End Summary

"No We Can't"

12. (C) While it will be several days before an official count is certified, it appears that General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz has secured a first-round victory in the July 18 presidential elections. The Minister of Interior (an opposition FNDD appointee) released the preliminary results in a statement July 20 indication that general Aziz had won the election with 52.58% of the votes cast followed by the FNDD's Messaoud Ould Boulkheir with 16.29% and the RFD's Ahmed Ould Daddah with 13.66%. Reports from election observers (including Mission personnel) indicate that most voting booths operated smoothly on election day providing those who chose to vote that right. Election monitors and experts working with the National Independent Electoral Commission report no significant irregularities. Sporadic incidents of heavier-than-normal police/military presence that may have been intended to influence the vote are unlikely to have been significant enough to have changed the plurality vote for Aziz. The CENI is supposed to forward its comments today to the Constitutional Council which will have up to ten days to certify the results.

13. (C) Opposition candidates have already rejected the election as a sham but are unable to document credible irregularities. The FNDD's Abdel Kaddous Ould Abeidna was at a loss to explain how, but saw the massive majority of votes for Aziz as impossible. An Ould Daddah emissary told DCM the

RFD feared the ballots had been chemically altered to change votes two hours after being deposited. The opposition parties fear for their futures should the U.S. join the rest of the international community in recognizing the vote. Mauritanian analysts unsympathetic to Aziz reluctantly accept the general trend of the elections suggesting that both elites and the poor were influenced by Aziz's financial largess throughout the campaign and, more fundamentally, by a Mauritanian penchant to "follow the one in power." When given the chance, it appears most Mauritians followed traditional practices over the more theoretical ideas of democracy.

¶4. (C) While Mission is surprised by the spread, we have from the beginning considered an Aziz victory as a very real, if not the likely, eventual outcome. We assess that the July 18 results are a reasonable reflection of the Mauritanian will -- however poorly thought out that will may be. Even if 20% of Aziz' votes were obtained fraudulently (and we have seen no evidence of that level of fraud), he would still have the plurality of votes.

An Aziz Presidency

¶5. (C) An Aziz presidency will establish an unfortunate precedent for Mauritania. Although domestic and international pressure prevented the August 2008 coup from becoming a fait accompli, the restoration of constitutional order stemming from the Dakar Accord has, in the end, effectively resulted in the confirmation of that coup. President Aziz will now face a very difficult economic situation that will not allow him to meet the many promises he made over the campaign. While we fully expect him to do everything he can to secure his base, it may well be just a matter of time before another coup removes him from power. It will be difficult for Aziz to rally the international defense of democracy enjoyed by President Abdallahi if and when that day comes. Political opposition representatives have already -- only half jokingly -- suggested justice will only be reached via Aziz' death.

¶6. (C) Aziz' past actions and campaign rhetoric give reason to fear that the institutions of democracy may be assailed as Aziz strikes back at his political enemies. The press, civil society, and opposition politicians will be subject to keen scrutiny looking for opportunities to constrain their activities. We expect legislative elections to follow which, if Aziz maintains the level of support shown in these presidential elections, could well result in a virtual one-party state reminiscent of the Taya years.

¶7. (C) Aziz campaigned on a strong "anti-corruption" platform promising to fill the jails with the corrupt political leaders of the past. There are few politicians in Mauritania who are not stained to some degree by corruption, but all signs are that the anti-corruption campaign will be used selectively to punish political enemies rather than to clean up how government works.

¶8. (C) Aziz will face a very difficult economic outlook as he assumes legitimacy. We expect most government funds were spent to bolster his position for these elections. Even if major donors unblock suspended assistance projects, there will be substantial lead time before those funds come on stream. The Deputy European Commission Representative (protect) expressed a cautious approach likely to be followed by most donors by saying, "Under Abdallahi we negotiated a number of political and financial conditions that would have to be met in 2007 and 2008 AFTER we released funds. If I have any say in it, we will insist that Aziz meet those conditions BEFORE we give him one Euro." An Aziz government will certainly not reignite the international adulation Abdallahi received in 2007 when his government received some \$500 million in development pledges than requested. Coupled with anemic international assistance, will be low world prices for Mauritania's export goods -- iron ore and

petroleum -- and relatively flat prices for its fish. While there are persistent rumors of a "big" oil find in the interior, it will take a decade for that to come on stream provided investors see the necessary price point and political risk to proceed.

¶9. (C) The Aziz camp and the opposition are so far apart, it is difficult to see them reaching some level of majority versus loyal opposition stability. A weakened opposition will continue to condemn Aziz at every turn. Not one to take criticism gracefully, he is likely to retaliate.

U.S. Relations

¶10. (C) 11 months of activist diplomacy against General Aziz' coup will complicate our relations as we deal with a legitimate President Aziz. Effective U.S. recognition will probably lessen the problem, but Aziz will remain highly distrustful of Washington's political intent. As noted above, we will approach Aziz with a "prove us wrong" predisposition to assuming he will perform poorly on human and political rights, on rule of law, and on economic transparency. At the outset, the U.S. would be best served to respect the legitimacy conferred by this vote and not work in opposition to the new Aziz government. While we hope we are wrong, we do not expect great things from Aziz -- but we should give him the chance to prove us wrong.

¶11. (C) Throughout the Abdallahi period and the ensuing coup d'etat, General Aziz has proven himself a credible ally against Al Qaeda -- we expect him to remain so. Although there may be some competition for attention from the French military and security services, we believe the Mauritians will be receptive to renewed and increased counter-terrorism cooperation in the intelligence, military, police and judiciary realms. The cooperation seen in the investigation and the apparent apprehension of the killers of AMCIIT Chris Leggett have highlighted both Mauritanian weaknesses and their desire to work towards addressing those weaknesses. We would continue to want to limit military and police cooperation to hard counterterrorism priorities that, until concerns over an Aziz record on human rights and good governance are assuaged, are unlikely to be used against Mauritanian civilian populations.

¶12. (C) We are uncertain how an Aziz government will approach our previous efforts at anti-radicalization ("soft" counterterrorism). The Aziz government is likely to be more focused on "hard" counterterrorism although many of the moderate imams previously identified for the USAID counter-extremism program are pro-Aziz. The degree to which the previously identified ministries needed for an effective anti-extremism campaign will be comfortable working with the U.S. will have to be seen. Post would welcome a mini-TSCTP conference in Nouakchott in mid-August to develop a coordinated Nouakchott CT strategy between AFRICOM, USAID, DOJ and State (both AF/RSA and INL).

¶13. (C) Democratization and Human Rights will be our significant policy priorities under an Aziz government. The election results sadly demonstrate the lack of development of democratic institutions -- particularly of parties, the media, and civic organizations. Despite the solid and committed core of Mauritanian anti-coup activists over the past year, the general population was not sufficiently affected to respond when given the chance to vote. Over the past year the role of parties in advancing broad political agendas beyond their own leaders interests has been enhanced. Bridges have been built between parties, civil society and unions. The role of the Senate and National Assembly has been greatly enhanced. The Constitutional Council has played a crucial and unbiased role at key points in the political crisis. These are all areas for further development.

¶14. (C) The Israeli Embassy's two remaining security officers advised the Embassy July 19 that they would be

leaving Mauritania that evening for a 10-day "vacation." Given the anti-Zionist tone Aziz used in his campaign, we assume Tel Aviv sees little chance of "unfreezing" their relationship with Mauritania at this time.

¶15. (C) General Aziz is likely to favor expansion of ties with the European countries that gave him tacit support (France, Spain, Germany, and Portugal) over the U.S. -- choosing the Americans only in areas where there is no suitable option elsewhere. Some suggest that with U.S. recognition, Aziz may try his best to patch up the relationship to ensure we remain, at worst, neutral. Given the probable financial difficulties facing any Mauritanian government, Aziz will probably continue to be open to Iranian influence and financial support.

What We Should Say

¶16. (C) While no great day for democracy in Africa, we accept that the July 18 elections reflect the Mauritanian will. Vocal opposition to an Aziz government before that government has had the opportunity to prove its merits will only prolong debilitating political strife and ultimately close off any chance of constructive engagement.

¶17. (SBU) Mission proposes a Washington statement along the following lines once election results have been confirmed by the Constitutional Council:

Despite a certain number of irregularities, the United States is convinced that the Mauritanian elections of July 18 reflected the general will of the Mauritanian people. We respect that vote and congratulate former General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz on his victory and look forward to working with his government on the multiple challenges facing his country. The Dakar Process succeeded in building the necessary basis of national consensus to return Mauritania to constitutional legitimacy and affording the Mauritanian people to freely choose their own leader. We call on General Aziz as well as all of Mauritania's political leaders to continue to work together constructively and respectfully in the interests of their people.

BOULWARE